DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 326 710 CE 056 553

AUTHOR Chene, Adele
TITLE Competence and Love, an Antidote to Ageing.
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (39th, Salt Lake City, UT, October 28-November 3, 1990).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Education; *Adult Educators; *Aging (Individuals); Competence; Educational Research; Foreign Countries; Love; *Older Adults; Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Response; *Teacher Student Relationship

ABSTRACT

An empirical study aimed at understanding the relationship aspect of older adult education focused on the perspective of the practitioners. Interviews were conducted with 14 groups of subjects composed of four older adults and one practitioner who had all been involved in learning activities together. Participants were invited to clarify their positions about learning, working with older adults, and establishing a rapport with older learners. Two broad categories of analysis were used to identify meaningful statements: learning, and being with older learners. Four subcategories of being with older learners were identified. In the first two, the role of "the lovable/loving person" and the role of "the competent person" were stressed by the practitioners. The perspective was reinforced with the other two subcategories: keeping in touch, and the older person as a factor in practitioner self-development. An exchange of roles by practitioners and learner was suggested. Competent practitioners were found to present themselves as engaged with the older learners in the same learning process. The role of the practitioner was also seen as being restorative. Competence and love were identified as an antidote to aging. (5 references) (YLB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED326710

Competence and Love, an Antidote to Ageing

Adèle Chené
Université de Montréal

Paper presented at the
39th Annual Adult Education Conference AAACE

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

A Chené

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CE 056 553

The growing participation of older adults in educational activities as well as the commitment of adult educators to working with older learners are recent subjects of concern but ones which have attracted increasing attention. On the one hand, older adults who may experience different forms of exclusion occupy a social space which is made legitimate by educational goals; on the other, educators are responding to a new field of practice and, in formal or informal settings, they teach older adults, they act as animators or leaders, and they design or conduct educational activities.

In this paper, we want to reflect on the role taken by adult educators in their relationship with older learners. Since there are negative stereotypes associated with ageing, one might wonder how adult educators could counteract the effect of such stereotypes or how they themselves relate to the ageing process. The age relationship is most often inverted in older adult education and the unanimous satisfaction of older learners and of adult educators when they speak about educational activities, as we have seen in a previous research, points to a complicity between educators and learners in regard to learning and ageing or, at least, indicates that the commitment of educators is not neutral.

In the first part of the paper, we shall present the results of an empirical study which aimed at understanding the relational aspect of older adult education, focusing on the perspective of the practitioners. In the second part of the paper, theoretical reference is given to support our interpretation of the response of practitioners to the needs of older adult learners.

I

To explore the relational aspects of older adult education, we interviewed fourteen groups of subjects composed each of four older adults and one practitioner who had all been involved in learning activities together. The series of interviews were conducted in eight different organizational contexts and the activities, half of them being formal, were all aimed at older adults; they ranged from philosophy and psychology of learning to physical education and self-defense, to painting and writing, to mention a few. It was assumed that the series of interviews would have a systemic quality and would encapsulate essential elements to be found in the different contexts. Not only was there a broad range of activities in terms of content and objectives, but the settings varied from college classes to community groups, including voluntary associations and popular education classes supported by school commissions at the secondary level, both in urban and semi-urban environments.

The subjects volunteered to participate following an invitation from our contact person in the organization. The sample is empirical and can be described as follows: over half of the older learners were between sixty and seventy years old and more than one third were more than seventy years old; in contrast, the category "forty to forty-nine" was the median of the group of practitioners. Of fourteen practitioners, four were men and ten were women; whereas the proportion of women learners to men learners was seven to one.

Some practitioners knew the participants very well because they had worked with them previously; others had an experience of a few sessions only. Although they had some expertise in their field of practice, their formal training varied extensively.

The interviews lasted about forty-five minutes. They were recorded and transcribed, producing over two hundred pages of data for the practitioners alone. The interviews with the practitioners followed the same pattern as with the older learners. They started with a very broad question: "What does it mean for you to be involved in this learning activity with older adults?" In the course of the interviews, the participants were invited to clarify their positions about learning itself, working with older adults and establishing a rapport with older learners, as well as about their own ageing and the effect of their practice with older learners on their own development.

The research was meant to be exploratory, and at the outset broad categories of analysis were used to identify meaningful statements. In the case of the practitioners, those categories are learning and being with older learners. The first series of interviews were used to test and stabilize more discriminating categories and subcategories. All the interviews were then analysed by two coders, and the analysis was revised by one person to insure congruence in terms of semantics and consistency in relation to economy and length of statements. The final analysis of data was done by computer.

To describe the role which adult educators play in their relationship with older learners, we use the broad category labelled being with older learners. We focus on four subcategories. In the first two, the role of the loveable/loving person and the role of the competent person are stressed by the practitioners. The perspective is reinforced and shifts at the same time with the other two following subcategories: keeping in touch and the older person, factor of evolution.

The loveable / loving person

Nine of the fourteen practitioners who were interviewed expressed themselves very strongly concerning their attachment to

the group of older learners they have been working with. Their attitude may be summarized in the statement of this young man teaching self-defense. He tries to be very supportive, "almost like a friend"; and he adds: "I feel attached to the older people and I do not think that it is possible to teach my subject without loving them".[1]

The qualities which are associated with love are warmth, sensitivity to others and the ability to listen. One dance teacher sees that her warm greeting and her friendly attitude helps older people to stay with the group. Similarly, friendly welcome is of prime importance for a physical instructor who later adds: "You become attached to the group, and it is important".

All the practitioners mention that they try to establish a climate of confidence. They are very attentive and respectful. They avoid calling upon one participant in a direct manner, and they encourage interaction with peers. Little by little, the participants get to know each other, feel more comfortable and become more receptive to the proposed activities.

Many interviewees mention that they feel close to the older learners, even to the point that there is an overt complicity: "I understand them well...I follow them", says one woman. This develops into a more solid bond and the intensity of the contact may be felt very strongly: "Sometimes during the class it is as if we were in a temple. I stop talking, and there is a great silence", reflects one college teacher.

Love may be expressed physically: "I hug them, they put their arm around my neck and we say hello, and we all have nice words for each other..." describes an art teacher. Love is also referred to

---

[1] The quotations have been translated from French to English. We have tried to stay as close as possible to the verbatim.

symbolically: "For me it is a family! At the beginning of a course, I always say that we have to be close to one another, I want us to love one another, it is a family that I want". Teaching will foster "privileged relationships" for one woman working in a community college. For another one, there is "a need for a certain dose of intimacy in the relationship with the older learners". She says that it helps her and that it also works. In summary, it is within a warm and loving relationship that the practitioners engage in learning activities with older people.

The competent person

The competent practitioners show mastery of their subject. To know your field, to be at the cutting edge, to be able to interpret the expression of the older learners in their art work or to pace physical activities are mentioned by the interviewees as being important in their respective areas. When dealing with academic content, the teachers recognize that they "need to know something if they want to give something to other people". This is found in formal and in informal contexts. The self-defense teacher recognizes the importance of giving correct information and he sees himself as "sharing his knowledge" with the learners. However, to see oneself as a figure of competence supposes in most cases that there is a disposition to question oneself at the same time, since "the class is a place where everyone is learning".

The competent practitioners with older learners are able to communicate and to solve problems rapidly; they are patient and empathetic, and they have a sense of humour. Clear and structured communication is important, as well as the ability to identify and work with the different levels of experience and knowledge of the older participant.

Finally, there is an affective dimension to the competent practitioner. One has to be warm and interested in every one of the older participants, to pay attention to the individuals and to

inquire about them discreetly, to respect their experience. To illustrate this dimension, let us refer to the following statement of a language and literature teacher: "We need to know a lot about the dynamism of older people...We are dealing with people who have lived through so many things..."

The older person, factor of evolution

More than half of the interviewees express the idea that working with older people has been inspiring for their own development. For instance, because she was able to establish close relationships within the group, one animator reveals that she gained access to the experience of older people as well as to their insights. For her, the participants are important resources to help her understand her own ageing process and to become a better practitioner. The age of the participants is perceived as an advantage because "as a group of adults, we can engage in a common research".

Experiential knowledge appears to be more valuable than theoretical principles in understanding life. Talking about his group of older students, one philosophy teacher says: "They gave me what is essential; they told me how to live". Sensitive to the reactions of older people, to their insights and their choices in "this life-adventure", he is looking for new ways of giving meaning to life, and observes: "I become the student of my students".

On the one hand, older learners are seen by the practitioners as models of identification: "It is a sort of wisdom that they have achieved, which I find attractive, and that I would like...an ideal", according to an art teacher. Similarly, a college teacher reflects: "I have in front of me many facets of ageing...when I see that the students develop, I see myself engaged in the same developing process".

On the other, the reference to the dynamism of life is explicit: "They broaden my horizon, it is incredible. For me, I evolve all the time" states one physical educator. The life of older people appears to impress the practitioners: "It is a wonderful experience to learn from them, from what emerges out of their life, from their philosophy of life". Also, the contribution of older people to the personal development of the practitioners strenghtens their attachment for them: "I love everything in these people; their affection, their understanding and what they contribute when they talk about their life. I find that very fulfilling" observes a music teacher in her fifties.

Keeping in touch

Among the interviewees, there are a few who are clear about separating their professional activity from their personal life, and the end of a session or of a contract is welcome when the learning objectives have been achieved. However, nine out of fourteen interviewees express some difficulty with parting form the group at the end of a course. This leads to a variety of behaviour ranging from taking some time during the last meeting to express the satisfaction with the group and, maybe, exchange gifts, to telephoning the participants during the summer vacation. Some practitioners have learned over the years how to deal with separation, for themselves as well as for the participants. For the others, the link which they have developed needs to be reinforced. For instance, a dance teacher tries to maintain the friendship in her group, and at the end of a session, she organizes a party which, she says, leaves her "with a little nostalgia". When participation is maintained over the years, the practitioners interpret it as a sign of friendship. And it reinforces their self-image. "The old participants continue to tell us that we are worthwile". In another context someone sees herself as "a pillar"; her stability is interpreted as a sign that one likes her and that she is a good teacher.

Because many participants are quite old, one does not forget that the ties can be broken by illness or death: "At the end, I always feel sad, and I say to myself: it is the end, shall I see them again?" The same person will keep in contact with her group during the summer. She keeps the group together as a community by reporting such things as the death of a member. And she stresses: "I do that because I would like others to remember me when I die."

After having invested so much in creating a climate of community, it is sometimes difficult to see the end of one's attachement: "I feel a little emotional, a little torn" confesses a teacher who tries not to exagerate his feelings.

II

In relation to our research, the interest that we find in the four categories of data presented is in the understanding of the two values central to the practice of older adult education, and at the same time, in the possibility of questioning these values.

The category the loveable/loving person can be coupled with the category keeping in touch. The practitioners, on the one hand, value love because it responds to the need of older people to be with others and because a friendly climate is essential to learning, but, on the other, there appears to be a need for love on their part as well.

Similarly, we may compare the category the competent person with the category the older person, factor of evolution. We observe that there is a shift from the quest for learning to which the practitioners are expected to respond, to the quest for learning of the practitioners themselves. Furthermore, the quest of the practitioners appears greater, since the whole life experience is concerned. Many practitioners are explicit about this: "I am the

one who receives the most", says one; "those people help me as much as I help them", says another.

We shall now attempt to understand what we see as an exchange of roles. We shall develop our discussion around the following questions:

1- Is the transformation of the role of the practitioners specific to older adult education?

2- Can the role of the practitioner be restorative. In other words, are competence and love an antidote to ageing?

In relation to the first question, we refer to Postic (1979) who has noticed that, in the case of adult education, there tends to be a symmetry in the relationship between the practitioners and the learners, on the basis of a "functional complementarity" (p.142). Together the teacher and the student progress in their interaction. However, if there is a positive value to reciprocity, this author suspects that there might be unconscious conflictual dimensions in the relationship between the teacher and the student, which comes from their relationship to knowing. If one wants to learn, it is because it gives power: "To know, for the teacher is to have the posibility to act on others. But to teach is to disposess oneself of the advantage over the other, it is to make the other as powerful as oneself" (p.176, we translate). The desire to learn also means the desire to become as powerful as the other.

The pedagogical contract has been studied by Filloux (1986), and she sees that the power relationship is transformed into a relationship in which both the student and the teacher become givers. The ideal image of the pedagogical situation fed by the vision of the teacher, is one of a harmonious relationship, efficient and happy, which allows both parties to share their desire to learn. However, it is possible that the bond which supports the exchange in the learning process might come to be desired as an end in itself. In other words, the teacher who may

not accept the love of the student as a preliminary step in his/her quest for knowledge, might unconsciously try to prevent the transfer to another object of love in order to retain the devotion of the student.

If we follow this argument, we begin to understand that the competent practitioner presents himself/herself as engaged with the older learners in the same learning process. We also understand the powerful bond that exists in the community of learners which the group becomes.

What is specific to older adult education is that the practitioner is usually younger, sometimes much younger than the student. This difference in age might unconsciously reactivate parental relationships. If so, the practitioner's quest for love may transform itself into an unconditional love for the older participant. Under those conditions, the older learner is invested with an unrecognized power, and the practitioner's competence may be diminished in light of the older learner's more global knowledge and its implied authority.

In relation to the second question, we refer to Rochlin's (1965) position on narcissism. According to him, one has to deal with losses and separation throughout life, but "the greater test of narcissism is aging or old age" (p.377). Indeed, with illness, the loss of loved ones, the transformations in the environment made necessary because of fewer resources, older people become more vulnerable. Meissner (1976) shares this point of view; as long as one can develop new ties, one can compensate for the different losses, restore one's self-esteem and personal value, but for older people they may be frauht with difficulty.

In light of this, we can suppose that the older person who participates in learning with a group already has a potential for restoring the self. In consequence, to play a supportive role in

relation to the restorative process, the practitioner would have to recognize that the resources of older people are continually depleted, and come to terms with the reality of a wounded self. If he/she denies the precariousness of existence or the limitations felt by old people, for instance by investing them with unacknowledged power, he/she undermines their autonomy.

In relation to the same question, a second argument is based on the study of social stereotypes (Rodin and Langer, 1980). It is well known that in industrialized societies, negative stereotypes are associated with people who no longer participate in the system of production, and that a biological view of human life contributes to diminishing the value related to old age. A negative image of the old is reproduced socially, and even those whom it represents behave accordingly.

In light of this, the action of practitioners in a context of adult education could aim at restoring a positive image not limited by biological or economic metaphores, for the older participants, and contribute to a transformation of the stereotypes. However, if the practitioner overemphasizes the competence of the learners or maintains a relationship of dependance because of an inability to keep a certain distance, love or recognition might produce the adverse effect of condescendance and reenforce the stereotypes. The data which we have examined supports the idea that it might be the practitioners, more than the older learners, who have difficulty in dealing with finitude and with ageing.

In conclusion, we would like to contrast two visions of what is at stake in the role of the practitioners in older adult education. A pragmatic analysis would point out that the status of practitioners is precarious in adult education, especially in non-formal contexts, and that their future depends on personal and professional recognition. They depend on their audience; they will

dominate it by giving it social recognition. Following this logic, their discourse on older learners would appear highly ideological, and may hide personal interests, maybe unconsciously so.

A more idealistic analysis would not question the genuine dedication of the practitioners and would underline the utopian character of the "common research" mentioned by one of the interviewees. In the marginal space of an emergent social practice, teachers and animators create a relationship which can resist time, and, in complicity, fulfill through learning their desire to live. This way, they transcend with the older learners the limitations of ageing.

Acknowledgements

This paper is related to research which was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. In a preliminary report, similar questions have been examined with the collaboration of Marie-Josée Fleury, M.Ed., research assistant.

References

Filloux, J. (1986). Du contrat pédagogique. 2nd edition. Paris: Dunod.

Meissner, W.W. (1976). Normal psychology and the aging process, revisited -1 Discussion. Journal of Geriatric Psychology, 9 (2): 151-160.

Postic, M. (1979). La relation éducative. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Rochlin, G. (1965). Griefs and Discontents. The Forces of Change. Boston: Little Brown.

Rodin, I. and Langer, E. (1980). Aging Labels: The Decline of Control and the Fall of Self-Esteem. Journal of Social Issues, 26 (2): 12-29.